



“Historians, Qur'an commentators and leading transmitters have committed frequent errors in the stories and events they reported. They accepted them in the plain transmitted form, without regard for its value. They did not check them with the principles underlying such historical situations, nor did they compare them with similar material. Also, they did not probe with the yardstick of philosophy, with the help of knowledge of the nature of things, or with the help of speculation and historical insight. Therefore, they strayed from the truth and found themselves lost in the desert of baseless assumptions and errors.”

The Introduction (Al Muqaddimah) by Ibn Khaldun

The importance of evaluating and citing your sources.

Any statement you make must have a source given for it. The best sources are those that are **primary** – they were generated at the time of the event and by someone who participated or was a witness to the event. Dealing with records from Morocco we usually have to rely on **secondary** sources (at best). These include such things as translations of original records (not translations of a translation), indices of records such as marriages or court records, extracts of records. They may be accurate, they may not – when utilizing secondary sources it is highly recommended to consult the primary source to verify its accuracy. **Tertiary** sources would include translations if it is a translation of a translation, e.g. a record written in Arabic is translated into French some time in the 19th century; in the 21st century someone (like me) translates the French record into English. The English translation is a **tertiary** source. These need to be checked for accuracy against the secondary source from which it came or, even better, checked against the primary source that is given in the translation.

Why is this important? Because every piece of evidence, every document, and every source is weighted according to the probability that it is an accurate recording of an event. Every step away from being primary increases the chances that the next generation is not accurate. Sometimes this is deliberate, such as when the author wants to make his leader look good and turns a military defeat into a *costly strategic victory*. Often a translation is wrong and since we are dealing with conversions between three different calendar systems, the chances are great that the dates in secondary and tertiary records are incorrect. From the Islamic to the Western calendar is one problem; from the Julian to Gregorian calendar is another. England stayed with the Julian calendar much longer meaning their year had March as the last, i.e. 12th, month while the rest of Europe had December as the last month of the year. Records written in English pose a unique problem because of this. If a record is translated from Spanish to English, did the translator keep the dates as used in the Spanish record or did they convert them to the English system? January 1603 in England was January 1604 in Spain. Finding this information out depends on whether or not the author decided to include that information in the article and/or if the event(s) are supported by other records for one particular date over another. Primary sources are preferred, secondary sources are allowable and tertiary sources are usually excluded from scholarly research papers but are allowable in historical research because many times they are what is available.

Here is a perfect example of what happens when the accepted standards are not followed. It is probably not through any deliberate attempt to mislead readers but the author(s) involved do have a responsibility to state that their writings are not necessarily based in fact and should be taken as fiction or something to that effect.

Latifa Babas writes the following in the blog *History: When the corsairs of Salé made a British island their naval base* which was posted 31 May 2019:

Although he had great ambitions and managed to sail near Iceland, Jan Janszoon and the Moroccan privateers failed to reach Denmark. "When [Murad Reis] tried

to attack the Danes, he was driven back by cannon fire," says Acta Militaria, a blog specializing in the story.¹

We know there are several problems with this statement. First, there was never any plan to “reach Denmark.” Second, no ship in the Iceland raid was “driven back by cannon fire.” The source given, *Acta Militaria*, may be a blog but it certainly does not specialize in presenting an accurate history going by this quote alone.

I found the *Acta Militaria* blog and this is what Nelson Lambert wrote in his blog *Britain and the Corsair Raids* which he posted on 28 September 2012:

However by 1627 Janszoon seems to decided it was time to move on. He set up a base on Lundy Island in the Bristol channel (so much for the Royal Navy of the time) which he maintained for 5 years, and launched a long voyage to the north Atlantic, capturing slaves from Iceland and Danish ships. When he tried to attack the Danish headquarters on Iceland he was repulsed by cannon fire and a force of lancers organised and waiting on the beach, but he picked up 108 slaves in the raid on Baltimore above.²

Mt. Lambert provides no documented sources for any part of his blog with the single exception of “English Calender of State Papers, June 1656.” By including this he is, in fact, saying that he personally consulted the English Calendar State Papers of June 1656 and actually copied *verbatim* what he read in them. He may have, who knows? But the misspelling of the word *Calender* makes me wonder. Note the dates as well.

Without being able to check what sources were used, it’s impossible to say whether what he wrote, he did so incorrectly or what he wrote was copied correctly but the source was wrong. Either way, this blog post is properly classified as a fictional work and it should be treated as such. *The Drowning Room* is a *fictional biography* of Grietje Reyniers and the author states that fact at the outset and the work is filed under *Fiction* in every library that has it. Anyone who quotes *Acta Militaria* is automatically creating a work of fiction, including the Babas blog post. How many people know that they are writing, let alone reading, fiction?

Harsh? Maybe. Necessary? Definitely. It is hard enough to dispel the errant stories about Jan Jansen van Haarlem that have been told and retold as gospel for over a hundred years that there is no need for the creation of new fanciful tales that tell an untrue story. An ethical imperative exists for *all* writers whether they are researchers, historians, amateurs, genealogists, or any other classification. That imperative dictates that the writer identify their work as fiction or non-fiction and, if the latter, provide full citations of sources.

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¹ Latifa Babas, “History: When the corsairs of Salé made a British island their naval base” Yabiladi, Posted 05/31/2019. URL: <https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/79010/histoire-quand-corsaires-sale-firent.html>

² Nelson Lambert, “Britain and the Corsair Raids,” *Acta Militaria*, 28 September 2012. URL: <https://nelsonlambert.blogspot.com/2012/09/britain-and-corsair-raids.html>